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ABSTRACT

Noting that program evaluators can profit by adopting the investigative journalist's goal of discovering hidden information, this guide explores the journalist's investigative process--without its element of suspicion--and discusses how components of this process can be applied to program evaluation. After listing the major characteristics of the investigative approach, the guide describes the use of an investigative posture in evaluation, lists criteria for determining when to use investigative journalism methods, outlines steps for carrying out an investigative program evaluation, and provides an example of investigative journalism techniques applicable for evaluation, using the Keller Plan teaching method (observation, interviews, analysis of records, and an interview to determine responses to previous data). Finally, the guide describes ethical and legal concerns of investigative journalism applicable to program evaluators and concludes with a glossary of terms commonly used in the investigative journalism field. (HTH)

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EVALUATION GUIDES

Guide Number 6

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM TECHNIQUES

Mark St. John

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The methods of investigative journalism are discussed, including:

- Characteristics of the Investigative Approach
- Knowing When to Use the Methods of Investigative Journalism
- Steps in Carrying Out an Investigative Evaluation
- An Example of the Investigative Approach in Education
- Ethical and Legal Concerns
- Caveats
- A Glossary of Terms

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> The job of the investigative reporter is to examine all the institutions of society and report how they work--not how they were designed to work or how their leaders claim they work, but how they really work.
>
> Williams, 1978, p. 188

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INVESTIGATIVE APPROACH

> The investigative reporter is the canker in the sore of the official mouth . . .
>
> Urban Policy Research Institute

The stories of two little-known reporters of the Washington Post, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, precipitated a series of historical events that instantly endowed the investigative reporter with celebrity status. Digging beneath the surface of of government life, they discovered a corrupt world of immense proportions. Their stories resulted in the indictment of high White House officials, led to the resignation of the President, and raised fundamental doubts about the institutions and laws that had allowed such corruption to grow unchecked.

Woodward and Bernstein are part of an American tradition of authors who have made it their purpose to question what they see. In writing about everything from hot dogs, to funerals, to Corvairs, investigative journalists share a common commitment to doubt and suspicion. The investigative reporter operates under what Douglas (1976) describes as

> . . . the assumption that profound conflicts of interests, values, and feelings pervade social life. It is taken for granted that many of the people one deals with, perhaps all people to some extent, have good reason to hide from others what they are doing and even to lie to them. Instead of trusting people and expecting trust in return, one suspects others and expects others to suspect him. Conflict is the reality of life; suspicion is the guiding principle.
>
> (p. 55)

The major characteristics of the investigative approach include the following:

- The goal of the investigative journalist is to discover and then uncover information which is important and hidden.

- The investigative journalist assumes defensiveness and non-cooperation.

- The investigative journalist maximizes the use of existing records as well as his/her own observations and interviews.

- As the investigation proceeds, the reporter continuously checks that the story remains feasible, significant, and acceptable.

- Great attention is paid to thoroughness, soundness, depth, and originality of research.

- In writing the final story, the reporter strives for fairness, not objectivity.

- The investigative reporter has a systemic focus and attempts to illustrate deeper issues with the specific case he/she is studying.

Usually the evaluator does not need to operate with the same degree of suspiciousness, and yet the evaluator may at times profit by adopting the journalist's goal of discovering information that is hidden. The journalist is looking for information that is hidden with malicious intent; the evaluator looks for realities that are hidden by surface descriptions, by the need of programs to present their best face, or by simple lack of awareness.

There are three ways in which evaluators might profit from studying the investigative reporter. Evaluators can

1. assume the reporter's investigative posture;

2. adapt some of the reporter's methods and tools;

3. learn from the reporter's experience with legal and ethical questions.

The Investigative Posture in Evaluation

Many times an evaluator begins the study of a program by simply observing it. After a while a feeling may emerge--a perception that something is happening (or not happening) that is inconsistent with the stated purposes of the program. There appears to be a discrepancy between the design and the actuality--between the espoused philosophy and the existing program practices, or between the described program operations and the actual ones.

Adopting the posture of the investigative reporter, the evaluator can begin to substantiate his/her perceptions by observations, interviews, and record searches. The evaluator needs to document that what he/she sees is (1) a consistent pattern (not an anomaly), (2) a significant pattern, and (3) an aspect of the program that is not generally known or acknowledged. As a final step, the evaluator can present his/her findings to the program director and other key participants, and probe their reactions in an in-depth interview. Out of this investigative process the evaluator will hopefully gain some insight into what is happening and will generate a deeper and more honest understanding of the program.

KNOWING WHEN TO USE THE METHODS OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

Provided below is a list to assist the evaluator in determining whether or not to use the methods of investigative journalism in an evaluation. Use these methods when

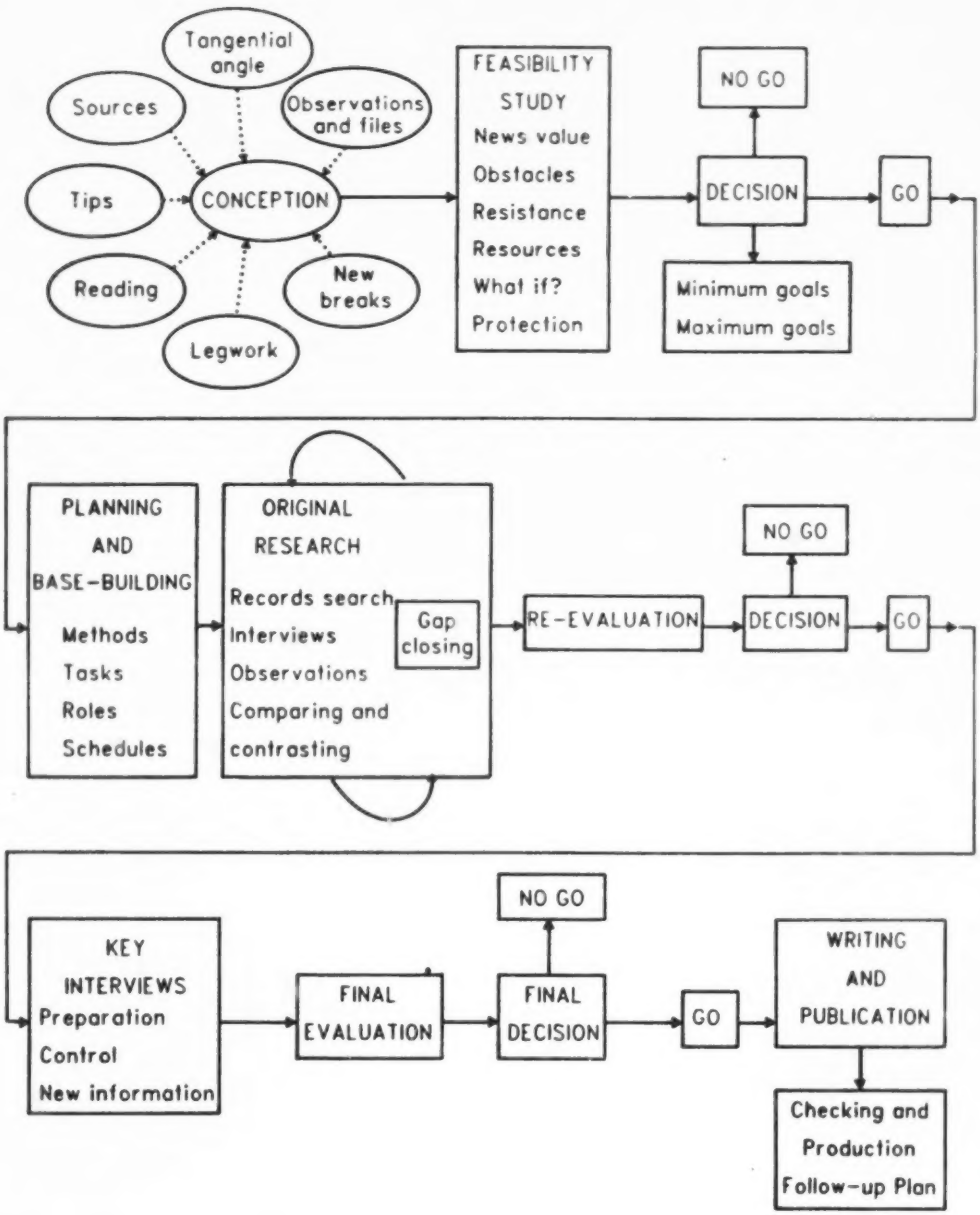
- the nature of the evaluation calls for a non-intrusive study of ongoing processes as they occur in their natural setting;
- there are individuals or organizations who are suspected of being incompetent (or being guilty of wrongdoing) and who may be defensive or uncooperative;
- the functioning of a program or an institution appears to be quite different from what it is presented to be or supposed to be;
- key information is buried in existing records;
- it is suspected that more systemic or fundamental problems underlie observed events and issues;
- an evaluation turns up unexplained major issues that go beyond the original evaluation mandate.

STEPS IN CARRYING OUT AN INVESTIGATIVE EVALUATION

This section outlines the major steps a journalist uses in carrying out an investigation. Most of them are techniques the evaluator may use or adapt for a particular evaluation (see Figure 1 and the glossary for more details).

Figure 1

THE PROCESS OF INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING



Williams, 1978, pp. 14-15

1. Conception

Germinal ideas can come from outside sources (tipsters, colleagues, and other leads), inside sources (leads from other work; spin-offs from other investigations), and blue-sky sources (serendipity and the acute "smell" of the intuitive reporter). The original conception of a story may be well defined or may be just a sense ("there is something rotten in the state of Denmark").

2. Feasibility Check

Reporters may initially prepare a memo for editors with answers outlined to the following questions:

Is it possible to do the story?
Do we have the required personnel and technical expertise?
Do we have the funds and other resources?
Do we have time? Will the story sit still long enough?
What are the barriers to getting the full story?
What are the barriers to publishing it?
What is the ultimate significance of the story?

3. Min/Max Projections--Go/No-Go Decision

The reporter estimates minimum and maximum story possibilities. Decisions are made with the editor about whether to proceed, postpone, or abort.

4. Planning/Base-Building

Personnel are assigned; files are set up; methods are outlined and deadlines determined. An initial attempt is made to formulate boundaries and a central focus for the study.

5. Original Research

Reporters engage in iterative cycles of hypotheses formulation, tracking (record searches), interviews, and observation. Profiles are developed and findings summarized.

6. Re-Evaluation--Go/No-Go Decision

Pending the outcome of the original research, the investigation may be given a green light, postponed, redirected, or aborted.

7. Key Interviews

Armed with the information gained so far, the investigators go to the focus (targets) of the story, seeking confirmation, denial, confrontation, and breakthroughs.

8. Re-Evaluation--Go/No-Go Decision

Should the story now be written up and published?

9. Reporting

The reporter chooses a central theme and writes a soundly documented story around it; he/she makes final substantiations and thoroughly checks all proofs.

> Investigative reporting is the uncovering of facts that someone--I would say substantial facts--that someone or some organization wants to keep hidden. That is part one of the definition. Part two of the definition is that it must be your own work.
>
> Bob Green, Newsday

AN EXAMPLE: AN EVALUATION OF A KELLER PLAN COURSE

An example of using investigative journalism techniques for evaluation is described below. It concerns the evaluation of the Keller Plan teaching method.

The Keller Plan is a course format in which students learn step-by-step as they progress at their own pace. Course material is divided into digestible learning modules, and students must demonstrate mastery of each module (by passing a test) before proceeding. In the evaluation of one such course, an investigative approach used observations, interviews, and careful examination of course records to see how closely the course actually followed the Keller Plan model.

Observation

After several weeks of watching the course in operation, the following variations in the Keller Plan model were observed:

- Tutors (who helped students and graded the module tests) formed close working (personal) relationships with students.

- The teaching and grading functions were inter-mixed. (The "grading" of the short module tests was taking an average of 30 minutes.)

- The grading of a test was as much a matter of judgment on the part of the tutor as it was an algorithmic procedure.

Interviews

Interviews with tutors and students yielded the following additional insights:

- Tutors felt social pressure to pass the students: "If you pass him you feel like you shouldn't have; if you fail him, you feel like a bad guy. It's a no-win situation."

- Students felt pressure to "keep on schedule"--a pressure which they passed on to the tutors: "I would talk to the student first and find out what schedule he was on. If he was way behind, I would pass him; otherwise I would ask him to try again."

- Tutors felt a pressure from the instructor to be more strict: "When the instructor is around the course center, you feel conflict because you know your way isn't the way he would do it. You know you are supposed to be doing it from his point of view."

- Tutors felt their teaching function was more important than grading: "Grading is subordinate to teaching. I do most of my teaching in grading sessions, because there is so much to do, and it is the only time I really get to see the people. Grading is a very important part of the learning process."

Analysis of Records

A review of the course test records revealed several other interesting and related facts:

- Many students failed the first test on a module and then immediately passed a second. (It turns out they used the first test as a practice and as a study guide.)

- Before the mid-term and end-of-course deadlines, the number of tests taken greatly increased, the time between tests decreased, and the ratio of first-time passes greatly increased. (Apparently tutors and students worked together to get everyone through the course on time.)

Key Interview

The information gained from observations, interviews, and record analyses presented a picture of the course that varied considerably from the self-paced, step-by-step mastery described by Keller. When the instructor was presented with the findings of the study, his reaction was:

> At the present time I am living with this phenomenon, and I would say I am not pleased. You know, I am not satisfied with the fact that this is happening, but I am not sure whether anything should be done about it, and to what extent something could be done about it . . . I have to judge to what extent imposing external constraints (which is all I could do) would work.

While the investigation did not lead to immediate solutions of the problems uncovered, it did dispel an illusion--the ideal of the Keller Plan model--so that what was actually happening became clearer.

ETHICAL AND LEGAL CONCERNS

This section describes the concerns that the investigative reporter must deal with: ethical, legal, and systemic. Many are concerns for the evaluator as well.

Ethical Concerns

From time to time, the investigative reporter may engage in one or more of the following practices in order to break the protective surface that hides the information he/she seeks:

- covert taping of phone calls or interviews;
- concealing true intentions, motives, or identities;
- accepting gifts;
- riding piggyback on another's interest;
- paying for information;
- changing faces and postures to be agreeable to different interests;
- imposing covert surveillance;
- invading privacy;

- breaching confidences;
- quoting out of context and/or selecting information to advance one's story.

Although these practices could be considered unethical, depending on the observer and the context of their use, the issues they raise are clearly relevant to the evaluator. Unfortunately, journalists' experience sheds only a little light on standards for the use of these practices. The following very general and conditional guidelines have emerged:

1. Avoid deceptive behavior where possible.
2. Be sure there are no other alternatives before engaging in deceptive behavior.
3. Err on the side of honesty.
4. Determine standards (what is permissible/not permissible) ahead of time.
5. Make sure the gain in the public interest that results from using deceptive practices outweighs the cost of using these practices.

Legal Concerns

The investigative reporter has encountered legal battles over access and protection of information. Freedom of information laws have provided access to many files and records previously classified as private. On the other hand, they may have made the files of the evaluator a matter of public record. Consequently, the protection of sources and guarantee of confidentiality may be something the evaluator can no longer give with total assurance. Finally, the evaluator may be able to learn from the libel law experience of the journalist--evaluators may need to take care to avoid suits for defamation or even for falsely "accrediting" a program which later proves to be lacking.

Systemic Concerns

Finally, journalists' systemic concern may be of example to the evaluator. Throughout the investigation and the writing of the story, the journalist is seeking to ground his/her story in deeper issues. Ultimately, the journalist seeks significant and widespread reform. Consequently, in addition to carrying out research and reporting the story, journalists make contact and personal connections with influential people who can do something

about the story they are writing. The journalist often suggests, by implication if not directly, actions that would lead to reform and long-term solutions.

CAVEATS

An evaluator using investigative journalism techniques may encounter difficulties, including the following:

- Adopting an investigative posture may lead to increased defensiveness and conflict with those being evaluated.
- Both the methods and products of an investigative approach may be considered unacceptable as evaluation.
- The investigation may well lead beyond the bounds of the originally stated evaluation mandate.
- Probing for deeper issues may uncover fundamental "unsolvable" difficulties--findings not welcomed by any of the evaluation audiences.
- Considerable resources may be expended on discovering a story that appears relevant and significant only to the evaluator.
- Adopting a guideline of fairness instead of objectivity may not be comprehensible or acceptable to the evaluation sponsor and audiences.
- Ethical questions of method may arise.
- The evaluator may be led astray by individuals with "axes to grind," or may be led to overstate the importance of the problems he/she discovers.
- There are usually consequences of revealing what someone may have wanted hidden.

A GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Like all professional fields, investigative journalism has developed its own key words and phrases. This glossary gives a sample of some of the most common terms, along with examples of useful evaluation techniques.

The Fast Study

This is the initial phase of an investigation where the reporter seeks to learn the territory. Through a review of what has been written, a reporter can avoid repeating what has already been done and can find promising points

of entry. Through a brief immersion in the scene, a reporter seeks to learn the laws and norms of the setting and to discover the perspectives of those involved. Also, the reporter may discover any hidden motivations or constraints behind the commissioning of the story. A brief fast study will aid greatly in formulating a reasonable investigation and may avoid much wasted effort.

Minimum/Maximum Goal Projection

After a fast study, and before beginning original research, reporters may formulate minimum and maximum projections for the story. The maximum is what they might get if all their hunches are borne out; the minimum is what they are almost assured of learning. (Before beginning an evaluation, evaluators might consider discussing similar projections with their clients.)

Evaluation examples of min/max projections:

1. At a minimum, we will be able to measure how well students mastered the basic math skills the program has specified it would teach. At a maximum, we will be able to certify that students gained some more general problem solving skills through their work in this program.

2. At a minimum, we will provide a good (thick) description of the program in action. At a maximum, we will be able to report insights that yield creative suggestions for future actions.

Tracking

Tracking is the main technique used in the initial research phase of the investigation. Starting with a hunch (hypothesis) in mind, the investigator looks for evidence that confirms or denies his/her suspicions. The reporter must use all of his/her worldly knowledge and creativity in imagining where and how tracks would be left behind. The ingenious mind may find many recorded evidences that tend to corroborate or deny proposed hypotheses. (Evaluators tend to always design their own instruments; they often underutilize documents, records, and other existing sources of information.)

Evaluation example:

An undergraduate physics course at a large university was to be taught entirely through a CAI (computer assisted instruction) method. In addition to the main programmed sections, there were optional sophisticated computer tutorials which taught a

variety of related physics topics. Developed under a National Science Foundation grant, these tutorials, and their use in an undergraduate course, were to be evaluated by an independent evaluator.

The first look at computer-use records showed that the tutorials were getting many hours of student use. However, this did not agree with the evaluator's assessment that the students' knowledge of the tutorial content was poor. Through a more careful look at the use records, it was seen that most students tried out (entered) most of the tutorials, but 90 percent of the tutorials were abandoned in less than 6 minutes. Only 5 percent of the tutorial interactions lasted for more than 30 minutes, which was judged to be a minimal time for significant interaction to have occurred. Almost all students were browsing and putting in an appearance.

Thus, the careful review of existing records--in this case the student-use pattern of the computer tutorials--gave a less optimistic picture than the original report suggested.

Modus Operandi

Closely related to tracking, modus operandi refers literally to a method of operating. (The mass murderer is identified with the specific trademarks of his kills.) Even when proof is not available, an accumulation of identifying clues, or a chain of connecting evidence, may be enough to substantiate a hypothesis or to help the reporter decide between alternatives.

Evaluation example:

In a student problem-solving course, the experimental group did not do significantly better than a control group on a difficult set of problems. However, a close examination of the scratch-work of the two groups revealed that the students in the problem-solving class had learned to use several heuristic diagrams in flexible ways.

Boundaries and Filling

Early in the investigation a boundary is determined so that investigative efforts can be limited to relevant issues. Once boundaries concerning people, dates, issues, and events have been agreed upon, it becomes clearer where there are missing links. Then interviews, observations, and record searches can be directed to "fill" the gaps.

Circling

In an interview, new information is obtained from one source. The reporter then circles this information around his/her other sources seeking confirmation and additions. Circling provides a natural way in an interview to introduce topics that may be uncomfortable.

Shuffling

This process is similar to circling, but more effort is made to build upon the information being shuffled around. Thus, material is presented to A; the interaction with A is recorded and the information modified as indicated. The altered version (or both versions) are presented to B for reaction; B's denial or confirmation is presented back to A or is taken on to C, and so on. . . .

Triangulation

The reporter looks for convergence of information gathered from different sources. If a proposition can survive the onslaught of a series of imperfect measures and checks, then it probably merits credibility.

Filing

Files are an integral tool of the investigative journalist. A separate file for each key individual is maintained and all files are cross-referenced. As information is collected, summaries are written and "profiles" developed. Complete, accurate, and organized files are important in helping the reporter to see possible connections, to draw accurate conclusions, and to substantiate inferences.

Key Interview

The culmination of the investigative process is the key interview. Those individuals central to the story, "the targets," are interviewed in order to confirm or deny the information that has already been put together. And, more importantly, the key interview is used to coax out additional critical information.

The six stages of the key interview have valuable analogues for the evaluator:

1. Gaining entry: Most individuals, even the most uncooperative, are reluctant to admit that they are unwilling to talk to the press, to present their own story.

2. Preparing: Rereading files, formatting the interview, preparing and ordering questions, and role playing are all preparatory means to make the most of the interview.

3. Opening the interview: The interview is typically begun in a easy, non-threatening manner. The ground to be covered should be outlined, and rules of fair play indicated, if needed.

4. Controlling the interview: Various techniques are used to keep control of the interview and to avoid sidetracks--feigning ignorance or naivete (the Colombo approach), understating the case, overstating the case (and thus eliciting confession to a less serious offense), hinting at greater knowledge than one actually possesses, and shock (direct and abrupt confrontation with facts the target is likely to think are hidden).

5. Confronting the target: The investigator maintains courtesy while increasing the pressure. Presenting documentation, becoming more specific, demonstrating contradictions, and even registering indignation are all ways of bringing the target to the heart of the matter.

6. Recording: As a backup, the interview should be (openly) recorded.

Whenever possible, the key interview should be done by a pair of reporters to increase pressure and accuracy of perceptions.

Example: The following are a reporter's recollection of a critical moment in a key interview.

> . . . at about the middle of the interview, you talk about intimidation and counterintimidation, he had been bottled up so long, wanting in his egotistical way to show us how wrong we were . . . that he starts answering questions way beyond what he should . . . We like to feel that when you go in to ask the questions you know 90 percent of the answers. Just the last 10 percent is what you are going to get if you are lucky. If not, you at least get self-serving statements that give you balance for your story. . . But he starts spilling stuff we hadn't heard--stuff that would put him in jail.
>
> Finally, his attorney passes him a note--"for Christ's sake--shut up!"
>
> Urban Policy Research Institute, 1976, pp. 13ff.

Reporting

In writing their story, investigators must keep the following questions in the forefront of their minds.

- What is this story about? What am I trying to prove?
- Who gives a damn?
- Why will they care?

(How many evaluations would be vastly improved by adherence to these questions?)

Follow-Through

Reporters are careful to monitor the production of their story, right up through the proofreading of the galleys, guarding carefully that no inaccuracy or error sneaks in. Reporters also stimulate public reaction to the story and maximize its impact where possible, so that it does more than create a short-term sensation.

Aborting

At several checkpoints during the investigation, the reporter makes a go/no-go decision. Many stories are aborted because they become unfeasible, too difficult, ill-advised, or of insufficient interest or significance. (Evaluators might do well to consider the abortion, or at least redirection, option as they proceed).

Teaming

Many reporters work in pairs, which has the advantage of checking emerging interpretations so that false projections are more quickly recognized and dropped. Other advantages of the team approach include the sharing of expertise, energy, and perceptions.

Fairness

Fairness replaces objectivity as the standard by which the validity of the investigation and story is to be judged. A fair story is one that presents all points of view from the advocate's position fully and without distortion. The ultimate "truth" of a story is of less concern to the reporter than telling a story which is substantiated and fairly represents all sides.

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